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FANZINES: NEW WAVE REBELS WITH A CLAUSE

BY KRISTINE MCKENNA

Phast Phreddie is impatient. It's 11:20 p.m. at the Whisky and one of his favorite bands, the Avengers, is a half-hour overdue on stage. Phreddie has raced to the club from the hamburger stand in the Valley where he works.

"Whatsa deal," he barks to no one in particular. In his customary narrow-lapel suit and tie and sporting a modified Prince Valiant haircut, he looks, at a glance, downright conservative. But there's something frantic about him. He's all over the room.

The Avengers finally go on and Phreddie is transfixed. Watching him feverishly gyrate with the beat, you get the feeling that music means something extra to him.

Nicknamed for his speedy abilities as a short-order cook, Phast Phreddie is not a fan in the normal sense of the word. For him, rock 'n' roll is more than an evening's entertainment. It's life itself, and he's been spreading the word since he bought his first single, the Doors' "Break on Through," in 1964. Figuring a magazine to be the best way to spread the news, Phast Phreddie, now 24, established his own to aid and abet the cause of rock. He called it Back Door Man, after the classic Willie Dixon blues tune that was popularized by the Doors.

The fanzine world is peopled with dedicated rockers like Phreddie, and fanzines are flourishing as never before. The racks at most contemporary record shops are likely to offer a dozen or so local music rags with titles like Lobotomy, Flipside, and Poseur. Most are comprised of gossip and nihilistic cant and their chances for a second issue seem slim at best. A few, however, might be around for a while.

The most widely read, and possibly L.A.'s best alternative music magazine, is Slash. Celebrating its first anniversary, Slash exudes an authoritative blend of intelligent judgment, literacy and humor.

Phast Phreddie's 3-year-old Back Door Man is not strictly a new-wave publication, but it reflects the spirit of punk in its spit-in-the-eye rebelliousness.

Rock entrepreneur Greg Shaw, owner of Bomp Records, was in on the ground floor of the fanzine biz with Bomp magazine, which debuted nine years ago.

"I've seen fanzines evolve through four distinct generations," he says. "There were only one or two fanzines when I started Bomp magazine, and there was no concept of national fandom. At that time fanzines imitated mainstream magazines.

"In 1972 a second generation evolved with an identity of its own separate from the national rock magazines.

"In 1973 the whole thing exploded—40 or 50 fanzines appeared that year. In '76, Sniffing Glue came from England. It was the first mimeographed fanzine and was the prototype for all the zines that are currently coming out.

"Fanzines appear to be thriving now but will never be a profitable industry because the point of a fanzine is to promote fandom, rather than make a profit."

The financial challenge faced by a young magazine is enough to knock the initiative out of all but the most dedicated fan. The chances of survival, much less success, are stacked heavily against new publications, with insiders estimating a 90% mortality rate.

But Slash and BDM are put out by men and women with a mission and it will take more than empty pockets to sway them from their task.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALAN HASHIMOTO

The Patterson family lives on a tree-lined street in a placid Torrance suburb. It's a quietly tasteful home in a typical Ozzie & Harriet neighborhood. A knocker on their front door urges one to "Praise the Lord," but upstairs in their son's bedroom, there's a shrine of a different sort.

The walls are papered with rock memorabilia canonizing everyone from Buddy Holly to Kiss. Records are scattered everywhere. A grimy badminton net is draped on one wall. A shelf of paperbacks features titles like "Gutter Gang" and "Only Lovers Left Alive." It's a Mad magazine conception of the cave of the eternal teen-ager. But it's home to Phast Phreddie.

Three years ago he and his friends became disenchanted with Creem magazine, the then-reigning hard-core magazine. About the same time, they saw Patti Smith at the Whisky.

"I went nuts when I saw her," recalls Phreddie. "Nobody was writing about her at the time and there were about 10 people in the audience. We went backstage and talked to her and she was really cool. It got me thinking about the fact that you never read about the good stuff anywhere. None of the magazines were talking about rock 'n' roll and me and my friends thought we had something to say. I had some money saved in the bank so I decided to write about the good stuff myself."

The first issue of Back Door Man was assembled in Phast Phreddie's bedroom with his hamburger-stand money and the energies of six fellow music buffs from the South Bay.

"We didn't know if there was a market for the magazine when we started," he comments. "I was surprised we got two issues out and I never thought we'd be around for three years. We ran 300 copies of the first issue and sold them all."

Things definitely have picked up. BDM's circulation is now about 7,500. But it is fast approaching a make-or-break point. The magazine gets slicker—and more expensive—with every issue, and Phast Phreddie feels outside backing is needed to guarantee the magazine's financial base. Without it, the publication's future may be threatened.

BDM covers a wider spectrum of rock than Slash, which deals solely with new wave. Anything sure to annoy one's parents is fair game for BDM. Many rock and new wave purists scoff at the magazine for covering acts like Ted Nugent, but, as Phast Phreddie explains, "You can't always have Eddie Cochran so you take what you can get.

"Music goes into slumps now and then. When we started out glitter was dying and punk hadn't happened yet. The only thing we had to talk about was Kiss and Aerosmith. At the time it was the only thing happening that was loud and pissed off your parents. Another reason we've had people like Gene Simmons (of Kiss) on the cover is because it's a way of getting people to pick up the magazine. Then we slip 'em stuff on Patti Smith and the Dictators."

In three years, BDM has evolved from a scruffy 35-cent fanzine to a glossy magazine that sells for $1. The look of the magazine has changed but its heart remains true to the basic edicts of rock.

"We started the magazine to find out if there was anybody out there who felt like we did. Well, we found some people and now the point is not to let them down. Back Door Man offers rock 'n' roll salvation and there's a lot of people out there who would dig it if they were exposed to it."

When Claude Bessy left France for Los Angeles 10 years ago, he didn't fancy himself the spokesman type. But if the L.A. punk scene has a spokesman, Kickboy Face—Bessy's pen name as chief writer for Slash magazine—is surely it.

He was working in a Santa Monica restaurant four years ago when he met Slash cofounder Philomena, a vacationing Britisher. Meanwhile, on the other side of town, free-lance designer Steve Samiof had met photographer Melanie Nissen. The two couples became friends and the staff of Slash was formed.

All in their late 20s, they were more or less at loose ends kicking around Los Angeles when new wave came along and suddenly music meant something again to them. There were things to say, but no place to say them, and in a sense Slash came into existence of its own accord.

"The whole thing happened in about two weeks," explains Philomena. "Steve saw an article in the L.A. Times about Malcolm McLaren's shop, Seditionaries, in London. We though it was exciting and considered writing an article on punk. Then, Claude and I went to see Television at the Whisky and ran into a friend of mine from England. At the time he was with the Damned and we interviewed them. So, we just sort of stumbled on this interview and all of a sudden there was an issue of Slash. Melanie was working at ABC Records at the time and they took out two ads which financed the first issue."

Adds Samiof, "We printed 5,000 copies of the first issues and sold about 80% of them. But by the second issue we were in the

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